

Debunking the smart-city myth



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I have been following the “smart city” conversation in Bangladesh for quite some time now. Last year I sat on a panel to discuss the topic during what was called the “smart-city week” in Dhaka. As Bangladesh urbanises rapidly, as mid-sized cities increasingly become its new urban frontier, the mayors of small towns across the country seem drawn to the idea of smart city. They frequently talk about how they are eager to transform their towns into smart cities. I myself spoke with a few mayors who sounded anxious to bring “smartness” to their towns.

I wondered what they actually meant. I puzzled over how they defined “smart city,” what kind of urban imageries they construed in their minds for their smart cities, what kind of life they thought people would live in their smart cities. I couldn’t help but think of the American short-

story writer Raymond Carver's anthology "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." What do the mayors talk about when they talk about smart cities?

I suspect that they talk about something that is not their idea, something that is not organic to their economic and cultural experiences, something that is one of the biggest hypes of our times. Do they feel pressured to jump on the smart-city bandwagon? Do they think that they would be considered backward if they didn't talk about smart cities? I wonder whether their dream of smart city is planted in their heads by international lending agencies, multinational corporations, and real-estate organisations for marketing purposes.

I suspect most mayors see smart city as a futuristic domain of glass towers, shopping malls, apartment blocks, ICT parks, theme parks, artificial lakes, bullet trains, sleek roads, signature flyovers, a lot of neon signs, and corporate executives. Smart cities all over the world look the same, the identical technocratic glitz, the identical corporate aesthetics, the identical financial mobility. One thing is absent: the everyday life of the people.

People also want to be free in the city. They do random things. Factory-like efficiency and big-brother digital devices in the city may stifle life and defeat the purpose of a city as a community place with its unique social characteristics and quirks.

We really can't blame our mayors for imagining this rather faultless future of abundance and unimpeded capital flow. A swanky smart-city perception has been crystallising over the past decade or so in Bangladesh and other developing countries. The notion of smart city is often packaged with a visual language of spectacular futurism and precision. We have been told over and over again how smart city is the surefire answer to urban chaos, inefficiency, and wastefulness. And, there was a breathless impatience to accept the grand smart-city solution.

So, what is a smart city actually? How do the pundits define it? There is no universal definition, yet its portrayal is alarmingly consistent across geographic regions. The concept of smart city is a cybernetic idea—that is, information or data can enable urban governments to establish total control over all aspects of life in the city, ranging from public transportation to electricity usage, from waste management to water supply.

This technocratic idea implies that a comprehensive system of digital infrastructures, including sensors and devices placed throughout the city, would amass a vast body of data on, among other things, people's movement and their spatial behaviour, traffic mobility, public transportation, energy usage, utility grid, water supply, and garbage collection. The digital infrastructure would then auto-create an efficient system of energy optimisation and frictionless management. In short, smart city proposes a system of data-driven urbanisation, ensuring energy efficiency, optimal mobilisation of resources, coordinated public service delivery, and intelligent management.

IBM has been creating digital urban infrastructures that would enable city governments to consolidate all urban-service providers under a central command-and-control mechanism, eliminating all system loss. Smart-city advocates, on the other hand, hope to attract foreign investment and capital mobilisation, with a view to developing their cities as hubs of economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

These are both very inspiring and dangerous ideas. Inspiring, because everybody wants efficiency. Who wouldn't want perfectly functioning streets with vehicles following traffic regulations and taking passengers to their destinations on time? Who wouldn't appreciate smart street signals that auto-adjust with fluctuating traffic volume in real time? Who wouldn't love a clean-energy utility system that lowers people's monthly energy bill? The core idea of smart city makes sense. We should, of course, take advantage of digital infrastructures to manage urban systems and operations.

But the smart-city idea, as it is often proposed, is also dangerous. The belief that we can mitigate a city's complex sociocultural issues with data-driven technical solutions tranquilises the very concept of the city, a place where people don't just become a system. People also want to be free in the city. They do random things. Factory-like efficiency and big-brother digital devices in the city may stifle life and defeat the purpose of a city as a community place with its unique social characteristics and quirks. I would rather be in Kolkata than Dubai. I would rather walk on the winding medieval streets of Prague than the hyper-efficient streets of Singapore.

If the intelligence of smart city is orchestrated by software programmers, technology giants, corporate CEOs, and high priests of neoliberal capital flow, then we, the people, need to be cautious because every aspect of our lives will be programmed and monitored by these invisible power-wielders. We don't need smart cities that only serve as neocolonial outposts, ensuring

smooth capital transfer to the Wall Streets of the world, while the local glass boxes would get peanuts and false pride.

Most worryingly, the identical architecture of smart cities across the world would only ensure a new generation of corporate global domination. We must be wary of top-down mantras that reframe the city's complex social, cultural, political, and economic issues as technical puzzles. Cities must be grounded in their unique local customs and indigenous spatial sensibilities, while also competing in the global marketplace with the strength of their future-ready aspirations and public resilience.

This, of course, doesn't mean that we shouldn't use data to ensure road safety in the city; or contain dengue by pinpointing its source; or divert vehicular traffic when there is a road congestion; or create intelligent footpaths that accommodate both pedestrians and vendors. We should use digital technologies to facilitate intelligent functioning of the city.

The biggest problem with the prevailing idea of smart city is that it is woefully generic, benefitting predatory capitalism that relies on the uniformity and homogenisation of people's lives across the world. At the heart of the smart-city hype is the misguided ideology that there is a universal technical solution to messy urban problems and unique environmental challenges. Can we get rid of urban poverty even if we have data about all aspects of the poor? It never works that way because a subject as complex as poverty can't be quantified into a mathematical question to be answered. Instead of prematurely believing in the instant transformation of city life promised by smart cities, we should focus on an ethos of step-by-step change in the city. By centring on the public good and resilience in both urban governance and digital infrastructure discourses we can create a smart community.

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